

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT FOR
H.R. 1562, THE VETERANS
HEALTH CARE COST RECOVERY
ACT OF 2003

HON. BOB BEAUPREZ

OF COLORADO

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, April 2, 2003

Mr. BEAUPREZ. Mr. Speaker, along with Mr. SMITH of New Jersey, Chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs; Mr. EVANS of Illinois, the Committee's Ranking Member; Mr. SIMMONS of Connecticut, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Health; and Mr. RODRIGUEZ of Texas, the Health Subcommittee's Ranking Member, I am introducing a bill to improve health care cost recovery programs in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

The Veterans Health Care Cost Recovery Act of 2003 would strengthen VA's rights under law to collect third-party reimbursements from certain third parties for the costs the Department incurs in providing health care to veterans and others covered by a private or public health plan. It would specifically authorize reimbursement for services provided by VA to persons enrolled in and/or receiving treatment from VA health care facilities. The absence of a participating agreement or other contractual agreement would no longer serve as grounds for denying or reducing amounts the Department may collect from third party payers.

With this legislation, the Department of Veterans Affairs would be deemed a "preferred provider" for purposes of collections when a payer might be a managed care or preferred provider organization or other non-traditional payer. This bill would authorize VA to receive full reimbursement for services provided to all persons with insurance, with the exception of service-disabled veterans for health care provided related to their service connected conditions. This bill would require health plans to reimburse VA for legitimate expenses associated with a covered beneficiary. A number of payers and plans that fully cover veterans have either refused to reimburse VA or have legally been unable to do so. This bill would eliminate such barriers to reimbursements to the VA system.

The Veterans Affairs Committee is fully aware that the VA health care system is seriously under-funded and unable to meet the demands being placed on it by our nation's veterans. VA health care is under great stress, as increasing enrollment and rising health care costs have resulted in hundreds of thousands of veterans being forced to wait months, some even more than a year, to see a VA doctor for the first time. VA recently reported that over 200,000 veterans are waiting six months or more to be seen in VA primary care. These proud defenders of our freedom should not be told to wait because we lack the resources, or even more unthinkable—told to go away.

Mr. Speaker, my bill would correct serious deficiencies in VA's ability to recover costs of care provided to patients covered by other health plans. Since 1986, VA has had statutory authority to collect from traditional insurers such as Blue Cross-Blue Shield, Aetna, Mutual of Omaha and many others. These funds are used by VA to supplement appropriated funds to maintain high quality health care.

But currently, VA is unable to collect from the sizeable managed care and preferred provider sector, which accounts now for over two-thirds of all health plans in the United States. This segment of the health care industry also includes the managed care plans within the Federal Employee Health Benefits Plan. My legislation would require the private sector programs to pay VA for care it provides to covered beneficiaries. This would increase the amount of money VA could collect by hundreds of millions of dollars each year—providing funds that are desperately needed to reduce the waiting lists and promote better use of all available health care resources.

Mr. Speaker, this is a sound proposal that would increase available health care dollars for veterans. I urge prompt House action on this important measure.

LEGISLATION TO AID DISPLACED
AVIATION WORKERS

HON. JAMES L. OBERSTAR

OF MINNESOTA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, April 2, 2003

Mr. OBERSTAR. Mr. Speaker, today, I have joined with Congressmen ENGLISH, NEY, HOYER, DUNN, LIPINSKI, HART, MENENDEZ, DEFAZIO and WEINER to introduce H.R. 1553, the Air Transportation Employees Assistance Act. I strongly support this legislation to ensure that workers in the aviation industry are not asked to bear a disproportionate share of the costs of fighting terrorism and the war with Iraq. These are national responsibilities and should be borne by the entire nation. We have already recognized this principle and granted financial relief to airline companies and their stockholders. Now we should grant some relief to the workers of these companies who have lost their jobs as a consequence of terrorism and war.

The airlines were the weapons used by the terrorists of 9/11, and, as a consequence, the airlines have suffered serious financial damages—from the groundings after 9/11, from the lost traffic which has never returned to pre 9/11 levels, from increased insurance costs, and from the loss of substantial revenues because of security limitations on the carriage of freight and mail.

The war with Iraq is also having a significant impact on the airlines, producing increased fuel costs, loss of revenue from the reluctance of passengers to fly, and from the need of our military to use the airlines' aircraft to carry troops and equipment to the war zone.

Shortly after September 11, Congress responded to the aviation industry's financial problems caused by terrorism, by passing a \$15 billion package of direct assistance and loans. Now proposals are going forward to furnish \$3.0 billion more to help the airlines meet the costs of a war with Iraq.

While I have supported these efforts to aid the industry for the problems created by terrorism and war, I, and many of my colleagues, are deeply disappointed that there has not been the same fair treatment of aviation industry employees who have also suffered from terrorism and war.

Even prior to the war with Iraq, the financial state of the airlines and the fate of their employees was deteriorating daily, as more than

150,000 industry employees were laid-off or furloughed. The situation has reached a crisis point and Congressional action is desperately needed to avert a total collapse of several air carriers and the elimination of thousands of jobs. The air carriers are now bleeding millions more each day as bookings plummet in the wake of the war. The airline industry predicts another 70,000 layoffs due to a severe drop in business resulting from the war. Moreover, Boeing, which already cut 30,000 workers due to aircraft order cancellations and deferrals following 9/11, says it will lay off nearly 1,000 more workers.

The issue of aiding aviation employees is not new. When we passed the \$15 billion assistance bill soon after September 11, many of my colleagues and I insisted that if the airline companies were to be afforded relief, so should employees who had lost their jobs. The Republican Leadership told us that there was no time to develop a consensus proposal on employee relief, but on the House Floor, Speaker HASTERT promised prompt consideration of employee relief, including financial assistance, ability to retain health insurance, and training for new careers. Regrettably, the Leadership has not followed through, and the House has never considered assistance for displaced airline employees.

Mr. Speaker, if the airline industry is entitled to special relief because it has suffered disproportionately from terrorism and war, its displaced workers are equally deserving of relief. Our bill will redress the imbalance, and help the industry's employees cope with difficulties arising from events outside their control. Our bill provides industry employees 26 additional weeks of unemployment benefits. Aviation industry employees were the first to be laid off after 9/11, and they were among the first to exhaust their state and federal jobless benefits. The current federal extension of those benefits as enacted earlier this year will soon expire, and it did not give any help to thousands of workers who had exhausted all their benefits. Aviation workers need and deserve our assistance as the war on terrorism causes a further contraction of the industry.

I urge my colleagues to support the Air Transportation Employees Assistance Act. We hope that it can be included in the Supplemental Appropriations Act which will soon be considered by the House.

HONORING THOMAS N. LESCH FOR
40 YEARS OF DEDICATED SERVICE

HON. GERALD D. KLECZKA

OF WISCONSIN

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, April 2, 2003

Mr. KLECZKA. Mr. Speaker, today I announce the retirement of a great friend of labor, Tom Lesch. Over the years, the machinists of Wisconsin have had no greater an advocate than Tom. For four decades, he has ably served in one capacity or another as a committed member and leader of Local Lodge 2110 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW).

Mr. Lesch started his union career as Local Lodge President, Recording Secretary, and Shop Committee Chair representing workers at Geuder, Paschke and Frey. In 1976, he became a Business Representative with District